RTA Reports

Regional Transportation Authority

June 2001

News from the Regional Transportation Authority of Northeastern Illinois

New Technology

RTA to Demonstrate Active Transit Signs

This photo composite shows how an active transit sign could look to riders at the CTA's Cumberland Station.

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"The desire for accurate and timely information has been expressed by our customers for years," said RTA Chairman Thomas J. McCracken, Jr. "The complexity of our region's transit system has presented its share of challenges in delivering real-time information. However, we feel that the demonstration project, as designed, will prove to be a valuable tool for our region's transit users."

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The Board's approval of the demonstration project marks the beginning of Phase III of the RTA's Active Transit Station Sign (ATSS) project, which was initiated in December 1998. Phases I & II developed functional requirements and conceptual designs, which were then developed into detailed engineering plans and specifications. Phase III will involve the construction and deployment of these signs at the CTA's Cumberland, Davis Street, O'Hare and Midway rail stations. This project will help the RTA, CTA, Metra and Pace identify technical and operational enhancements that will be used to guide the deployment of active transit signs throughout the region.

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Chairman's Letter

The past few years have been good for transit in Northeastern Illinois. Ridership continues to grow and the condition of our infrastructure continues to improve as funds from Illinois FIRST and TEA-21 are put to work.

The resurgence of public transit is not just a local phenomenon. According to data compiled by the American Public Transit Association, mass-transit ridership in the United States has been growing at a faster pace than highway use for the past three years. In Northeastern Illinois, Metra posted its largest ridership totals last year since taking over the operation of commuter rail service in 1983. A total of 78.7 million rides were taken on Metra in 2000. While Pace carried 38.6 million passengers, the CTA provided 450.5 million rides in 2000— an increase of nearly 2 percent from 1999.

Our riders wouldn't be using transit if it didn't meet their needs. The work that the RTA, CTA, Metra and Pace have done to improve the quality and reliability of our region's transit service is reaping positive results. The bond proceeds provided through Illinois FIRST are putting new buses on the streets and Metra has ordered 300 new rail cars to replace its aging fleet and expand services. Illinois FIRST bond proceeds will also provide the local match for the CTA's Blue and Brown Line renovations and Metra's three service expansion projects. The Federal Transit Administration has provided support through full funding grant agreements for each of these projects.

The Bush Administration's FY 2002 budget proposal also demonstrates continued federal support for transit. The federal transit program budget of $6.7 billion preserves the funding levels established by TEA-21. While some areas are targeted for spending cuts, overall transportation spending would increase by 6 percent under the Bush plan. For our region, the FY 2002 budget proposal includes $35 million for the Douglas Branch of the Blue Line, $19 million to expand Metra South West Service to Manhattan and a total of $43 million for Metra's extension to Elburn and improvements to the North Central Service to Antioch.

Our challenge is to continue to put these funds to use in ways that will pay dividends to our riders. As the FY 2002 budget makes its way through Congress, we at the RTA, CTA, Metra and Pace will work together to ensure that we receive the funding we need to move forward. We will also work to ensure that each capital project proceeds efficiently so that we can continue to provide the best possible service to our current and future riders.

Thomas J. McCracken Jr.
Chairman

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time train and schedule information. This information will then be transmitted to the demonstration sites and displayed on electronic signs at station entrances, walkways and platforms. The demonstration project will be in operation for one year after installation is completed.

The iNOVA Corporation, of Charlottesville, Va., was selected for the project through a competitive bidding process. iNOVA was the primary contractor for the passenger information display system for the Washington, D.C. subway system and will be teaming with Divane Brothers Electric Company and Daktronics Inc. Divane provided power and fiber optic network installations for both the CTA and Metra. Daktronics has provided electronic signs for the Illinois Tollway.

Funding for the $1.5 million demonstration project will be provided by the RTA's New Technology Funding program and by IDOT. The RTA will provide 63 percent of the total project cost and IDOT will reimburse the RTA for the remaining 37 percent of the costs. ■

Regional Coordination Plan Marks Milestones

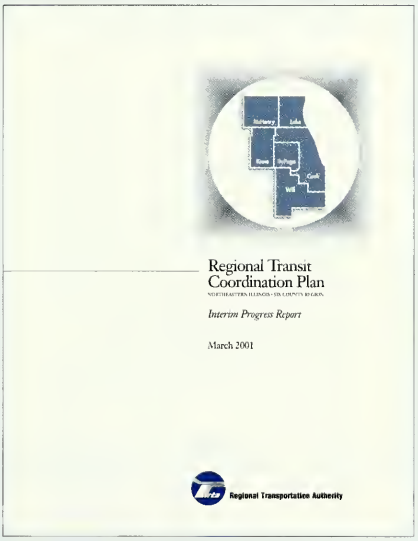
The RTA continues its development of a Regional Transit Coordination Plan with the completion of a study of transit transfer locations and the completion of the first round of citizen and stakeholder focus groups.

The transfer location study, completed in March 2001, found that existing transfer locations serve most of the region's travel markets and should be the focus of efforts to improve transfer opportunities. In all, nearly 300 locations were identified throughout the region where it is possible for riders to transfer between CTA, Metra and Pace services.

The location study, completed with the assistance of the consulting firm Booz-Allen & Hamilton, also identified 51 potential transfer locations based on proposed new stations, rail line extensions and new rail lines.

"The location study is a key component of the development of a coordination plan," said John DeLaurentiis, RTA Planning Director. "It is critical that we understand exactly where transfers between agencies are feasible and where transfers are actually occurring today. What we've found is that out of the more than 2 million rides taken on our region's transit system each weekday 70,000 are estimated to involve interagency transfers."

Downtown Metra stations are among the region's top transfer locations with most passengers transferring between Metra trains and CTA buses. CTA terminal stations like 95th Street, Midway, Howard, Forest Park, Harlem/Lake and 54th/Cermak and major transfer hubs like Rosemont, Jefferson Park and Davis Street are primarily used by passengers to transfer between Pace and CTA services. The Naperville and Lisle Metra stations are the top locations for transfers between Metra and Pace services. Each of the sites listed above account for a minimum of 1,000 interagency transfers each weekday.



Regional Transit Coordination Plan Interim Report and Appendices are available

The study noted that there were fewer than 200 transfers per day between Metra and CTA rail services at each of the region's primary rail-to-rail transfer points (Jefferson Park in Chicago, Davis Street in Evanston and Harlem/Lake in Oak Park). However, each of these facilities had more than 1,000 interagency transfers daily. With these preliminary numbers, the study noted that construction of new stations solely for the purpose of rail-to-rail transfers might not be warranted.

To begin addressing coordination improvements at some of the prime transfer locations, the RTA has issued a request for proposals for a consultant to examine information coordination and physical coordination issues. This project will assess existing directional information and service information from the perspective of transferring passengers. Based on these assessments, specific improvements will be proposed to facilitate transfers. RTA staff plans to recommend a consultant for this component of the Regional Transit Coordination Plan to the RTA Board of Directors in June 2001.

The effort by the RTA to develop a Regional Transit Coordination Plan began in 1999, with encouragement and funding from the Illinois House of Representatives. The plan development is focusing on four areas: physical coordination, service coordination, fare coordination and information coordination.

In addition to the location study, three focus groups of residents from throughout the region were held in the Fall of 2000 as well as a focus group of community and business leaders. Both types of focus groups were used to assess public perception of coordination issues. Major issues brought forward by both community leaders and residents were the need for better distribution and display of transit information, the need for the different transit services to adjust schedules to facilitate transfers, and the need for more service and more flexible hours for suburban transit services. A study of the different fare media used by the CTA, Metra, and Pace was also completed in 2000. ■

Popularity of RTA Web-based Trip Planner Continues to Grow

Are you looking to avoid the hassles of driving? Or would you just like to know the quickest or most direct transit route to your destination? More and more RTA riders are using the agency's Internet trip planner to find the answers to these questions.

Since its January debut, visits to the RTA's trip planning web site have grown steadily increasing by a rate of nearly 10,000 visits each month. In April, 46,701 visits were made to the site. The site is currently averaging more than 1,500 visits each day.

"The steady increase in visitors to our web site shows that we're giving the public something that they want," said RTA Executive Director Richard J. Bacigalupo. "It's a quick and easy way for people to review their travel options at any time day or night and to see how many destinations across the region can be reached on transit."

The trip planner is accessible through the RTA web site **http://www.rtachicago.com**. The site uses the same database used by the RTA's Travel Information Center, which contains updated schedules for the CTA, Metra and Pace. Users fill out a simple form with the origin, destination, time of their trip and other pertinent information. The information is then used to generate a transit itinerary. You can also reach this site directly at **http://tripsweb.rtachicago.com** or through links on the CTA and Pace's web sites.

In addition to the itinerary planning system, the RTA System Map is now also available on the RTA web site. The map is another tool intended to help the region's residents as well as tourists use and understand the transit system.

The RTA worked with the Chicago-based web development firm DH Burnham, Inc., to develop both the itinerary planning function and the RTA map display. Another RTA contractor, Mantech Inc. of Chesapeake,Va., developed the transit information database for the RTA Travel Information Center that is being used by the web site.

While the web site is a fast and easy way to plan your trips, the RTA Travel Information Center is still available to answer any questions you may have about traveling on the CTA, Metra or Pace. The Travel Information Center can be reached at 836-7000 from any area code in the six-county region. Operators are available to take calls from 5 a.m. to 1 a.m. every day. ■

Northwest Corridor Transit Studies to Continue

Studies of transit opportunities in the region's northwest corridor will continue under agreement signed recently by the RTA, the Northeastern Illinois Planning Commission (NIPC) and the Chicago Area Transportation Study (CATS).

The recent agreement establishes each agency's role in the analysis of transit alternatives for Phase II. The RTA will be responsible for the overall conduct of the study with support from CATS and NIPC at key milestones. NIPC will also assist corridor participants with planning, design and implementation of transit supportive land development policies.

"By taking such a systematic approach and outlining the responsibilities of each party, we believe that the study's outcome will generate the transit alternative that will best serve the corridor and meet federal funding requirements," said RTA Executive Director Richard J. Bacigalupo.

The communities involved in the first study (Elk Grove Village, Hoffman Estates, Rolling Meadows, Rosemont and Schaumburg) and the Northwest Municipal Conference (NWMC) as well as the region's transit operators and the Illinois Toll Highway Authority (ISHTA) will participate in the detailed evaluation of each of the options developed in the first phase. These options included express bus, bus rapid transit (BRT), light rail, CTA-style heavy rail, commuter rail and high occupancy vehicle (HOV) lanes.

The goal of the second phase of the Northwest Corridor Study is to select a locally preferred alternative based on transportation options developed in the first study. As part of this effort, participants will further analyze the capital and operating costs, ridership and overall feasibility of each of these alternatives. Once a "locally preferred alternative" is selected, the CTA, Metra or Pace to move toward the actual development of new service will undertake a third phase of study. The study participants plan to complete Phase II in December 2002. ■

Program Proposals Sought for FY 2002 RTAP

The Regional Transportation Authority is now requesting proposals for projects to be considered for the FY 2002 Regional Technical Assistance Program (RTAP).

The RTAP was created in 1998 to promote transit planning in the six-county region utilizing RTA technical and financial resources. Through RTAP, the RTA facilitates the formation of funding partnerships and uses these partnerships to leverage the dollars available under existing transit funding programs. The RTAP provides consultation services, technical support, planning assistance, information services as well as presentations, training and workshops on transit planning issues. From 1999-2001, RTAP assistance was given to a total of 32 projects from across the region.

The RTA's review committee, composed of staff from the RTA, CTA, Metra, Pace and other regional planning agencies, will evaluate all proposals submitted. The RTA looks for projects that are cost-effective approaches to improving transit usage and decreasing congestion. The deadline for submissions for the FY 2002 program is July 13.

"The RTAP program is the mechanism by which the RTA has become actively involved in assessing local transportation needs," said RTA Chairman Thomas J. McCracken, Jr. "Over the past three years, the RTAP program has become an established part of the region's transportation planning process as more communities realize that mobility issues must be addressed as a central part of local planning efforts."

Communities interested in submitting applications for the FY 2002 RTAP should contact Jay Ciavarella at (312) 917-1429 or ciavarellaj@rtachicago.org to request an application packet.

FY 2001 RTAP PROJECTS:

Cook County

- Brookfield Transit-Oriented Development Corridor
- Maywood Transit-Oriented Development Plan
- Oak Forest Transit-Oriented Development Concept Plan
- Rosemont Dedicated Bus System Study

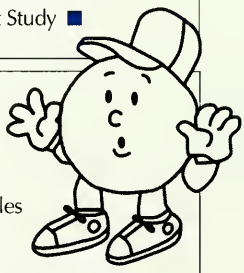
Lake County

- Transit Component for the 2020 Lake County Transportation Plan

McHenry County

- Fox River Grove Downtown Redevelopment Plan
- Woodstock Transit-Oriented Development Study ■

RTA Efforts Recognized



The efforts of the RTA's staff have recently been recognized winning awards for their financial reporting, videos, and maps.

For the sixth consecutive year, the RTA's Controller's Office has been recognized for excellence in the preparation of the agency Comprehensive Financial Report (CAFR).

The Government Finance Officers Association of the United States and Canada (GFOA) awarded a Certificate of Achievement for Excellence in Financial Reporting to the RTA for its 1999 CAFR. The CAFR covers all funds and financial transactions of the RTA during the fiscal year. The award is designed to recognize and encourage excellence in financial reporting by state and local governments and represents a significant accomplishment for a government and its management.

Both the American Public Transit Association (APTA) and Transportation Marketing Communications Association (TMCA) have recognized the RTA's SMART Rider video for excellence. The video,which is used to teach safety and courtesy on the transit to elementary students, combines live-action and animation to show many of the exciting places that can be reached by transit and to emphasize the principles of the SMART Rider program. The video placed first in its category at APTA's 21st Annual AdWheel Awards and received an award of merit from the TMCA.

The RTA's station display maps placed first in their category at the 25th annual gathering of the Printing Association of the South. The map displays developed by Smartmaps, of Knoxville, Tenn., have been placed in Metra's downtown stations to help travelers make connections with the region's other transit services to destinations. ■

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TAKE ADVANTAGE OF **Tax Free Transit**

Are you missing out on a great tax benefit? Thousands of people across the six-county region are commuting tax free with the RTA/CTA Transit Benefit Program.

The program allows both employers and their employees to take advantage of tax laws to reduce commuting costs. Employees whose companies participate can set aside up to $65 of pre-tax income each month to pay for public transportation. The benefit can also be fully or partially subsidized by the employer. In January 2002, the pre-tax amount is expected to increase from $65 to $100 per month.

The RTA/CTA Benefit Program is flexible and offers a number of fare options to meet commuter needs. Participants can select either CTA fare cards or RTA Transit Checks, which can be used to purchase fares or passes on any part of the region's transit system—the CTA, Metra, Pace, South Shore Railroad or van pools. RTA Transit Checks are redeemable almost everywhere that transit fares are sold.

More than 1,800 Chicago area companies representing 30,000 employees currently participate in the program. Employers have found it to be a positive recruiting and retention tool.

To learn more about how you and your company can enjoy the benefits of tax-free transit, call 1-800-531-2828 and request a brochure. You'll get all the details you need for everyone at your company to start saving money on their commute.

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RTA Reports is prepared by the Communications Department of the Regional Transportation Authority, 181 West Madison Street, Suite 1900, Chicago, Illinois 60602

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